

Muddle-Head Thinking Revs Up The Air War

DURING this past week when World War I vets of my vintage observed the true Armistice Day on November 11, casualty lists in the Vietnam war were reported as "the lowest in months."

"The low casualty levels," said the Associated Press, "reflected a general lull in battle-field action as well as the continuing withdrawal of American forces from combat."

A mere reading of the official casualty list, eight Americans killed in combat, 13 wounded and 33 dead from non-hostile causes, is evidence that we are indeed winding down the ground war as President Nixon proceeds with his "plan."

'A Massive Scale'

BUT WHAT about that other war, the massive deployment of American air power and renewed emphasis on saturation bombing by B-52 Stratofortresses?

A recent report by Cornell University researchers shows that in Cambodia, American air operations have been conducted with sustained intensity since 1970. B-52 raids in Northern Laos, as reported by James McCartney of our Washington bureau at the time, were carried out for more than a year before official acknowledgment. "Protective reaction raids against North Vietnam," says the Cornell report, "strike a wider range of targets than their official description implies."

While the Cornell study concedes that "there has indeed been a significant withdrawal of American air power from Southeast Asia, more than enough planes remain to permit a continuation of the air war on a massive scale."

So it appears that contrary to reports and impressions, the air war in Indochina is not being wound down like the ground war. Cornell's conclusions are that the administration's policy of "withdrawal-without-political-compromise" leaves it still boxed in by the enemy's military initiatives; the only response available is massive retaliation from the air."

Costs And Results

TO REVIEW our past and present policies, what have been the costs and results of massive aerial firepower? The study, sponsored by the Center for International Studies at Cornell University, offers these statistics:

1—In 1971, as much bombing is being done in Indochina as was conducted in all theaters of World War II.

2—By the end of this year, the Nixon administration will have deployed in three years as much bomb tonnage as did the Johnson administration in five.

3—In South Vietnam alone, the United States has dropped 3.6 million tons of bombs, almost four times as much as we used in the Korean war. Only 5 to 8 per cent of the air sorties flown in South Vietnam are for ground

support of troops in battle; the rest were for interdiction, harassment and retaliation in a country not being attacked from the air.

The result was widespread civil destruction among the population whose allegiance was and is being sought. It is estimated there have been over one million civilian casualties, including 325,000 deaths, while six million people have become refugees.

4—Bombing in North Vietnam between 1965 and 1968 failed to yield significant results. Economic damage inflicted was about \$500 million, casualties reached 100,000 of which 80,000 were civilians. Yet CIA and Defense Department studies showed no measurable reduction in North Vietnam's "will or capacity for contributing to the war in the South."

After the bombing "halt" in 1968, the emphasis shifted first to below the 20th parallel, and then to Laos and the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

5—Despite administration denials, a major U.S. air effort has been carried out in Northern Laos to support the Royal Lao government. Cornell reports widespread devastation of Laotian society, but says despite these massive bombing efforts the Pathet Lao (Communist) now control more territory than ever before.

6—The direct budgetary cost of the air war has been around \$25 billion, or about one-quarter the cost of the Indochina war.